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Statement submitted by International Federation of Associations of the Elderly, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

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Statement

Recognition, support and protection for vulnerable older persons

The International Federation of Associations of the Elderly has been campaigning for many years for changes to public policy that provide support and assistance to the most vulnerable people. There is an absolute need to establish a branch dedicated to the development of social and legal protections for older persons.

We are aware that the world today is undergoing a very strong demographic transformation and social protection systems must constantly evolve in order to guarantee everybody's human right to social security, because failure to adapt such systems would expose the population to poverty, inequality and social exclusion.

Today, only a structurally inclusive society can respond to the challenges of ageing with an appropriate and positive outlook; this naturally involves a paradigm shift.

This increase in the ageing population is at the heart of the thinking of many associations and professionals and must be a core political concern. As people age, some remain full of constructive energy but others lose some of their independence, potentially leading to dependence on others. However, despite this fact, all persons must be considered to be independent agents and respected in their decision-making while being assisted or even protected when their independence is reduced. It is therefore essential to approach this issue by also focusing on each person's feelings, needs, expectations, desires and values. Any affront to personal dignity is unacceptable and has potentially dramatic consequences that can lead, among other things, to long-term psychological problems and, in some cases, to suicide.

The abilities of people with physical and/or psychological limitations must be recognized, both for the people themselves and those close to them. Every older person considered to be vulnerable must benefit from "tailor-made" protection regimes adapted to their health problems or even disability, and tailor-made and sometimes temporary support.

Society must be aware that older persons and particularly women do not have sufficient income to be independent and many of them are forced to work until a very advanced age in order to lead a life with dignity. Indeed, there are vulnerable people who need daily help to be able to maintain a certain degree of independence. It should be possible to guarantee sufficient income security and medical and social care for all older persons, taking into account their needs and, of course, the increase in the cost of living. However, to reduce public spending, many countries are reducing their social security budgets, further exacerbating poverty and the inability of the most vulnerable to simply enjoy access to the assistance they need. This inadequate social protection is synonymous with poverty and deepens inequalities in society. Older persons are often treated as objects of social assistance rather than as subjects with rights. The current crisis further increases the vulnerability of older people and exposes them to deprivation of their rights and social exclusion.

That is why the International Federation of Organizations of the Elderly and its partners are in favour of a new legally binding instrument that would clarify the nature of the rights of older persons, especially as regards their unrestricted and unconstrained access to those rights. The rights of older persons would thus be included in a single document that would recognize the specific challenges associated with ageing and would serve as an anti-discrimination tool to eradicate negative age-related stereotypes.

From a legal perspective, while medical experts are often consulted, too little consideration is given to any psychosocial evaluation when it comes to obtaining an opinion on the relationship between a person's state of health and his or her ability to make a particular decision. Limited resources are in place for medical, psychosocial and environmental analyses of the decision-making or judgement capacities of a person who is temporarily or permanently vulnerable. Deprived of these concerted tools and faced with a need for an opinion, lawyers or doctors today must still analyse the capacities of the person concerned on a case-by-case basis, solely in accordance with their professional views and inner convictions. Hence the importance of a multidimensional assessment consisting not only of a medical examination but an approach to and an analysis of the whole person. The choice of protection measure must therefore be based on a thorough medical, psychological, social, fiscal, family background and environmental assessment.

It is therefore necessary to establish, to the greatest possible extent, a coherent legal framework that effectively recognizes a person's capacity and the expression of his or her will and choices and preferences.

Only a public policy sensitive to the many contributions that older persons make to the economy will proactively support older persons, particularly those rendered most vulnerable by the temporary or chronic problems that affect them, and will enable real progress to be made. This calls for a public debate with choices and priorities, including in terms of material resources.

Lack of access to social protection is an obstacle to economic and social development. Countries must build a genuinely paradigm-shifting national strategy that aims to promote human development and inclusive economic growth.